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ABSTRACT

An introductory course in notetaking for low intermediate students of English as a second language (ESL) is described. The course is designed to give practice in notetaking techniques to college-bound ESI students before they are required to take notes with a competence equal to that of native speakers. The class begins with a discussion of common myths about notetaking versus simple listening, text-reading, or tape-recording. Subsequent activities include a discussion of format or organization; a classroom practice session using a tape-recorded talk, with the teacher taking real notes on the board; teacher-presented talks accompanied by student vocabulary preparation; exercises in discerning main ideas only and then details, accompanied by class discussion; an exercise focusing on abbreviations and partial sentences; writing summaries from notes; and answering questions from notes. Suggestions for making the activities more effective are also given. (MSE)

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PLEASE TAKE NOTE:
Teaching Low Level Notetaking

Karen Stanley

Notetaking during a lecture is a complex task, difficult even for native speakers. Combining the skills of understanding, classifying, and writing down information is a function of time and practice. It is therefore important not only to teach notetaking to ESL students, but to begin teaching it EARLY. Waiting until students are at an advanced level in their English acquisition gives them little time to practice before they are required to take notes with a competence equal to that of native speakers. The techniques presented here were developed through classroom use with low intermediate students in an intensive ESL program. There were approximately 12 students in a class which met 75 hours per semester. All students were preparing to study in an academic program at an American college or university.

Good notetaking skills are essential for optimum achievement in the classroom. However, because of the difficulty of the task, many students try to deny the necessity of learning to take notes. Since students learn best when they are motivated by a belief in the task, it is worth taking time to discuss the importance of notetaking. The following are some of the more prevalent myths on the subject:

(a) MYTH: I understand more if all I do is listen, so it's better just to listen.
ARGUMENT: How easy is it to remember everything later? By practicing now, you can make it easy both to understand AND to take notes.

(b) MYTH: I can study the book.
ARGUMENT: An average of 80% of the information which appears on any American college exam will be discussed in class. There may also be information from the lecture that is not in the book. If you have good notes, you can almost be assured of a good grade on a test WITHOUT ever reading the book. Which is more difficult, carefully studying 30 pages of notes, or 300 pages of text?

(c) MYTH: I can taperecord the lectures.
ARGUMENT: First, not every instructor permits this. Second, and more important: Which will be more difficult, studying 30 pages of good written notes before the test, or listening to 10 hours of lecture tapes and trying to learn the information from them? Also, which will take more time? A taperecorder is good as BACKUP, but not as primary source.

A discussion of format comes next. This precedes any practice by students, so it is kept on a rudimentary level. Formal outlines are NOT introduced as a model for notetaking. Rarely do people take notes that way, and the intricacy of a formal outline can make the task seem more difficult than ever. Instead, it is sufficient to discuss placing main ideas at the margin and indenting details. The basic idea of abbreviations and partial (telegraph-type) sentences is also introduced. If the students have a reading passage they are working with, it may be useful to go through it with them and discuss/demonstrate on the board how it MIGHT look if it were being written down in note form. Another useful technique to mention here is that of allowing a lot of space, both in the margins and within the text of the notes, where information can be added.

The next step is to bring in a short tape. The tape should be one whose

subject matter is familiar to the instructor (and, if possible, to the students), but whose actual content has not been heard before. Colleagues in other areas will often allow their lectures to be taped. The tape is then played in class. The instructor takes REAL notes on the blackboard; the students watch. (If there is no 3-4 panel blackboard, large sheets of newsprint can be taped along the walls.) When there is no more space, stop the tape. The point is not to demonstrate "perfect" notetaking, but to have the students see the instructor crossing out, rearranging, adding, and missing information. They begin to get a feel for notetaking, and at the same time they realize that even native speakers have irregularities and confusion in their notes. This awareness usually decreases the intimidation students feel, and a degree of comfort takes hold.

It is now time to introduce students to their first "talk." The best talks are short (5-10 minutes) and well-organized. The subject matter should be familiar to the students. Even with familiar subject matter, however, preparation for listening is necessary. Whenever possible, students read an article on the subject to increase vocabulary and background information. Additional preparation involves class discussion about the subject. Students volunteer vocabulary associated with the topic; this vocabulary is listed on the board as it is brought up. Information which the students find to be particularly important or interesting may also be listed. It is not important to exhaust the students' ideas, or to discourage ideas or vocabulary that seems less relevant. The important thing is to activate the students' own knowledge of the subject.

The students are now ready to listen to the talk for the first time. It is better if the instructor gives the talks, especially in the beginning. Few tapes which are produced for low-level students mimic true lectures (i.e, unlike most tapes, lecturers repeat information, write information on the board, and pause while students note more complicated information). It is necessary to be extremely familiar with the talk. If possible, only a 3x5 card with notes should be used; reading entirely from a piece of paper rarely imitates true lecture phrasing. As the class progresses, guest speakers (carefully coached by the instructor) may be used. If video equipment is available, videotapes of the regular instructor, the guests, and other lecturers can be used in class as the main talk, and/or outside of class for review and additional practice.

The first time that students listen to a particular talk they should not take notes. In the beginning, if the students appear to be particularly confused or lost, it may be useful for them to listen a second time without notetaking. As the class becomes more proficient, the listening-only stage may be omitted. A word of caution: even though this initial stage is for understanding, student questions should not be allowed to slow down the instructor to the point that too much is explained and repeated. This defeats the purpose of practice notetaking.

Since one problem many students have is sorting main ideas from details, they now listen to the talk and write down MAIN IDEAS ONLY. (If appropriate, this stage of the talk may be repeated as well.) Once the students have had an adequate opportunity to note the main ideas, their choices should be written on the board, unedited. The class as a whole then discusses which are and are not main ideas.

Factors which help to identify main ideas include signal words and phrases, summary statements, pauses, and the level of generality of a statement. In discussing these, it is important not to overwhelm low level students with too much information. Especially in the beginning, the instructor is best off working with only the cues used in the talk. (If the

students are working on identification of main ideas in a concurrent reading class, both instructors will find the reinforcement extremely helpful.)

After the main ideas have been determined, they should be left on the board with a lot of space between them. This extra space leads into the next step: listening for and listing supporting details under the appropriate main idea. After the purpose of the space is explained to the students, they list the main ideas in their notebooks (at the margin) with sufficient space under each; a reminder to indent details is sometimes necessary. Since the instructor inserts at least some extraneous comments in the talk, just as in standard lectures, the student has three main tasks in this stage: (a) to decide what details support which main ideas (primarily a function of sequence), (b) to decide if something should be written down, and (c) to try to get all essential information on paper. These tasks should be explained to students BEFORE they listen. Again, repetition of the talk at this stage may be necessary for lower level students.

After the students have listened for and noted down the details, the procedure used with main ideas is repeated. That is, students provide details, which are listed in unedited form on the board. The class then discusses the appropriateness of each.

It is usually at this point that students are ready for more detailed practice with abbreviations and "partial" sentences. While a handout of common abbreviations is useful, most important is encouraging students to develop their own. One way to do this is to let students know that they will be asked to share their abbreviations when the talk is over. Other "short" ways that students use to note ideas may also be elicited.

Students often have problems using abbreviations and partial sentences. One exercise which focuses on this skill uses a written version of a previous talk. The written copy is arranged with main ideas at the margin and supporting details indented, all in complete sentences. The class decides how each sentence could be shortened and abbreviated. If this is done on the board, each student transfers the shortened version to paper. Then the students turn the paper over and the board is erased. The instructor presents the talk orally, and the students write down as "shortened" a version as they can. They can check it themselves against the class version. As in previous stages, the same talk may be repeated if it appears that more practice is needed.

It is now time for the instructor to demonstrate notetaking on the blackboard again. Since the students have become more familiar with the process, they will notice more and different things (e.g., use of arrows, question marks, circling, starring, initials, and unfinished words, and arrangement of space.) Not only does this new instructor-notetaking generate student observations, but instructors themselves become increasingly aware of their own notetaking techniques.

Again, it must be remembered that lower level students are not ready to learn EVERYTHING. As difficult as it can be to resist teaching ALL the useful points, awareness of the students' saturation point is extremely important. In addition, abbreviations, symbols and other "short cuts" are fairly individualized, and it is wise to spend more time in helping students develop their own technique than in listing elements of the instructor's style.

Sometime during the process of learning abbreviations (but not right at the beginning) it is necessary to discuss the importance of reviewing notes and filling in information. The positive value of comparing notes with other students can also be mentioned.

It is best if several talks can be given on each topic. Familiarity with the subject matter helps students immensely. In addition, this is similar to real life situations, since in any class students will build a body of knowledge around a particular subject.

One supplementary activity can be writing summaries from notes. However, a student's ability to understand and take notes may well outstrip composition level, so it is important to focus on content rather than grammar. In one variation of this activity, notes are collected from the students and held for two or three days before the summaries are written. In this way students must truly depend on written notes rather than short-term auditory memory.

One testing device is to have the students take notes on a talk (always on a topic that has been introduced at a previous time). Afterward, students use their notes to answer questions. A choice of questions (answer 5 out of 8 of Set A, 7 out of 10 of Set B, etc.) can help keep the test reasonable. Use of T/F, multiple choice, fill in the blank, and occasional short answer questions familiarizes the class with these question styles. A sample test (not collected by the instructor) should always be done before their first REAL test. It is important for students to have a clear idea of purpose and expectations.

Above all, the learning process needs to be as non-threatening as possible. It is not productive to use test-like materials at every turn. With notetaking already a difficult skill to learn, a constant "testing" atmosphere can discourage a student, and nervousness over the test-like questions can inhibit the ability to understand a lecture.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Jane Sinclair (West Bloomfield, Michigan) to the development of these techniques.

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